THE PLEASURE OF GOD

Wooster College

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"Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." --Luke 3:22 (RSV)

Scripture

~~Luke 3:15-22~~ Mark 1:4-11
Heb 13 P46

Garrison Keillor's bestseller, Lake Wobegon Days, is a book about - Grace, among other things. As you probably know, Keillor is the creator and star of a weekly American Public Radio program called "A Prairie Home Companion," which in the past several years has gathered about it a cult of zealots who wear Lake Wobegon T-shirts, buy tapes of Keillor's wonderful nonologues, and swap gossip about his personal life. Among the zealots - and I am only on the periphery of this particular cult -

the Saturday dinner hour broadcast time is inviolate, sacred space, dedicated to the unlikely activity of sitting and listening to the radio.

One of Keillor's more remarkable monologues was about "The Storm Child." I discovered something of the Word in this story; a commentary on ~~our~~ the text for this day - "And the Holy spirit descended upon him...and a voice came from heaven, '~~Thou~~ You are my beloved ~~Son~~ Child; with ~~thee~~ You I am well pleased.'"

"After sixth grade, I left Sunnyvale and rode the bus in to Lake Wobegon High in town, where Mr. Detman was principal, a man who looked as if wild dogs were after him and a giant icicle hung over his head. Worry ate at Mr. Detman. He yelled at us when we ran downstairs, believing we would fall and break our necks and die on the landing. He imagined pupils choking on food and wouldn't allow meat in the lunchroom unless it was ground up. He had his own winter fear--that a blizzard would

sweep in and school buses be marooned on the roads and children perish, so, in October, he announced that each pupil who lived in the country would be assigned a Storm Home in town. If a blizzard struck during school, we'd go to our Storm Home.

"Mine was the Kloeckls', an old couple who lived in a little green cottage by the lake. She kept a rock garden on the lake side, with terraces of alyssum, rising to a statue of the blessed Virgin seated, and around her feet a bed of marigolds... it looked like the home of the kindly old couple that the children lost inthe forest suddenly come upon in a clearing and know they are lucky to be in a story with a happy ending. That was how I felt about theKloeckls. After I got their name on a slip of paper I walked by their house and inspected it, though my family might have wondered about my assignment to a Catholic home, had they known. We were suspicious of Catholics, enough to wonder if perhaps the Pope had ordered them to take

in little Protestant children during blizzards and make them say therosary for their suppers. But I imagined the Kloeckls had personally chosen me as their storm child because they liked me. 'Him!" ' they had told Mr. Detman. 'In the event of a blizzard, we want that boy! The skinny one with the thick glasses!'

"No blizzard came during school hours that year, all the snowstorms were convenient evening or weekend ones, and I never got to stay with the Kloeckls, but they were often in my thoughts and they grew large in my imagination. My Storm Home. Blizzards aren't the only storms and not the worst by any means. I could imagine worse things. If the worst should come, I could go to the Kloeckls and knock on their door. 'Hello,' I'd say. 'I'm your storm child.'

"'Oh, I know,' she'd say. 'I was wondering when you'd come. Oh, it's good to see you. How would you like a hot chocolate and an oatmeal

cookie?'

"We'd sit at the table. 'Looks like this storm is going to last awhile.'

"'Yes.'

"'Terrible storm. They say it's going to get worse before it stops. I just pray for anyone who's out in this."

'

"'Yes.'

"'But we're so glad to have you. I can't tell you. Carl! Come down and see who's here!'

"'Is it the strom child?;

'

"'Yes! Himself, in the flesh!'" (pp. 248, 249)

The essence of the Christian religion is grace. On a broad, theological level it is a revolutionary assertion that God, creator, source of life, ground of being loves the creation: . . . doesn't despise it, isn't even neutral, but

passionately loves the creation, is pleased with creation. The personal variation of that theme is — GRACE — God's unconditional love and acceptance and the experience of value and self worth which results.

It sounds simple, but it isn't. It is illusive, radical and most ofus not only don't understand it, but spend a lot of time pursuing it and in frustration accepting substitutes.

It is so central that the story, which is for us the vehicle of the good News begins with an incident that is pure grace.

We don't know what Jesus did between the age of twelve, when we last hear about him, and thirty, when he reappears one day on the banks of the Jordan River and is baptized by his cousin John. Scholarly speculation suggests that he lived at home, worked in his father's carpenter shop in Nazareth, earned a living - perhaps supporting his family after Joseph died, attended synagog and, in general, lived a fairly normal life for a

Palestinian Jew of that time. Part of what Jesus of Nazareth surely did, was part of what all of us do in that time frame, namely get ready for the rest of our lives: wait for, wonder about, struggle with options, experiement with something called our vocation; the purpose of ourlife, our calling, or what we hope to do when we grow up. The purpose of our being here this A.M. has something to do with that. The assumption is being made this A.M. - with rejoicing and parental sighs of relief that this part of the journey is over for some of you. If they only knew! - If they ask you today to declare yourself - on the subject of your vocation, you may now remind then that Jesus didn't get around to his until he was 30.

as parents are inclined to do on graduation weekend

Jesus came out to the river to hear John preach for the same reason that you or I suddenly decide to go to church, or a concert, or a lecture, or to a play or ~~to hear an evangelist preach~~, on the outside chance that while we're there we'll get some clue

about the meaning of ourlife. And while he was there listening to his cousin, John, flailing away at the hypocrisy and phoniness in Israel and how God demands righeousness and total commitment, Jesus came to some instant conclusions about the meaning of his own thirty year old life and what he wanted to do with the rest of it. And so, only slightly impetuously, he stepped into the muddy water and allowed \John to baptize him, which John said was a way to be washed clean of the past and to begin life all over again, and for him the experience was so devastatingly beautiful that he must have told his disciples about it and they remembered it and told about it after he died. Now it is always precarious to try to recapture in words another person's private religious experience. But the words the gospel writers chose are good ones, and memorable and haunting: "...the spirit, like a dove descended upon him...' and that voice which he alone heard - 'TYou are my

my beloved child, truly ...

beloved son - I am pleased with you - you are God's pleasure.'"

It was his commencement. It was the event that launched him into the rest of his life, that incredible three-year pilgrimage that forever changed human history. And at it's heart, before it is anything else, it is grace - an experience of God's unconditional love and acceptance - and pleasure..." You are mychild...I am pleased with you."

The religion we espouse begins here: not really with a set of philosophic propositions or moral imperatives, but with this experience between Jesus and god, between child and parent, creature and creator. It begins, that is to say, very near the heart of the universal human experience.

One doesn't have to look far for it. Your own life is a good starting place and the mirrors of our experience - the Arts and the Behavioral Sciences are full of reminders. Garrison Keillor,

in the Storm Child story, knows about the human need for affirmation and grace. So does Alice Walker. Her remarkable novel, The Color Purple, and the stunning movie based on it, is about the absolute human need for grace, the destructive and demonic propensity of life when it is deprived of it, and the potential for newness, for rebirth, for resurrection, when grace happens.

The Behavioral Sciences support the theological and artistic articulations of the theme.

If the parents of the class of '86 got together to discover what we did to produce such gifted young men and wome, I'll bet we'd discover that the one thing we all did when you were babies was run out and ~~lay~~ buy the parenting Bible of that day, Haim Ginott's Between Parent and Child - which advises over and over again that "a child's greatest fear is being unloved and abandoned by his parents." (p. 135) Ginott taught us not to say

(x) and in that I had one in 82 + 83 - + God with ours then another in 87 + 88 + 93 - so I am pleased to accept him/my parent status ...

what we wanted to say, namely, "If you spill your milk one more time, I'm leaving." More to the point, Ginott taught us about grace.

Dr. Thomas Harris wrote an enormously popular and helpful book, I'm OK - You're OK, which proposed that most of us spend most of our time trying to feel "OK" or trying to cope with the fact that we don't feel "OK" either about ourselves, or about others. And we continue to learn - although we seem grossly unwilling to do anything publically and politically about it, that the opposite of grace and acceptance, - namely child abuse, by parents - or people abuse by the system - is the most dangerous and self-perpetuating and self-destructive dynamic in our culture. If we know anything for sure about the human condition it is that people who have been told they don't matter, will - when they begin to believe it - act like human life doesn't matter. That truth, of course, has enormous implications for social policy and it

is currently not very popular.

The Christian religion begins with the radical assertion that God the creator loves the world: that the world and everything in it is pleasing to God and that the best thing about the world in God's eyes is the human life that is in it. Human lives are valuable. God loves them. People are the pleasure of God.

In one of our very oldest stories the creator God is portrayed as kneeling in the mud, lovingly, carefully fashioning a human being, and then breathing breath into it, life.

At the heart of it is this grace, the passionate, unconditional love of God for the world and the people in it. But somewhere we got off track and forgot that part, ~~and redefined it.~~ Somewhere about the time Christianity had its notorious love affair with Greek philosophy, the enterprise got refocused and we began to conclude that God is most interested in some other order of

being, some other time or place: that God doesn't love us as we are but as we could be, or perhaps as we will be someday after we die and go somewhere else.

Under the strong influence of Hellenism Christianity allowed its attention to be refocused somewhere other than this world, and life and human beings. It has been an altogehter durable heresy. We, whose God kneels in the soft mud of the earth to make us, have been persuaded that religion is best when it is otherworldly and that what God made is suspect, if not outrightly evil. Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall observes "An hour's listening to the electronic church of a Sunday morning is all that is necessary to document the fact that this propensity to embrace a spiritualism that despises the world is still very much with us." [Stewardship: A Biblical Image Come of Age, p. 33] And in a kind of ultimately, ironical trust, the most zealous of ~~them all~~ are the contemporary religionists

we are transformed as we commune or when we lose ourselves or get in shape - or join the church.

the ones who seem absolutely eager for the end to come. Armageddon, the end of the world, and of the life God created.

The result is a world and a race of human beings in the world who seem despised, not loved.. a world in which 800 million people are hungry: a world so overpopulated that it cannot possibly sustain the people already alive if they should all try to live as we do: a world in which there are 400 priority targets, by government estimate, for nuclear destruction in this country alone: a world in which every community of more than 50,000 people in this nation has "those things" Lewis Thomas calls them, already aimed at them...

These are all problems that can be solved. We don't have to bleed this civilization of its treasures and its hope in order to build more and bigger and better systems to destroy life. The cost of one new sophisticated jet fighter would establish 40,000 working pharmacies in a third

world country and just might be more persuasive ultimately when it comes to talking about whose revolution is more hopeful. What this world and this nation needs is a graduating class of people who know how to love the world and the people in it.

The essence of Christianity is this radical sequence:

God loves the world

God loves you

God wants you to love the world.

There is a wonderful passage in the The Brothers Karamazof when Dostoyevsky has Father Zosima say it for us:

"Brothers...Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything youwill perceive the divine mystery in things." [D. J. Hall, ib. 2]

The world needs people who love it and ..

Our deepest need as persons is to be worth something...to matter, to be loved.

When I try to comprehend why the early disciples decided to follow Jesus I conclude that ithad something todo with this grace: some extension into their lives of the experience that changed his lfe -that momentary grace when he knew the love and pleasure of God. Somehow, with him, from him, in him, they were included in that powerful grace. Standing close to him, it flowed over them. ~~And so, this grace, became and becomes~~ the church's precious treasure. It is what we are about. It is what we celebrate. It is what we have to offer. Our basic reason for being is to remind each other of grace.

The Good News is that the God who created us, loves us unconditionally. In Paul's words, "The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of god and fellow heirs with Christ." {Romans 8:15-

17]

Our vocation is to become God's children, to act like God's children, to live a life of freedom and joy and peace because the god who created - loves us, is pleased with us.

It is an incredible suggestion. ~~God loves us.~~ Somehow, what was said to Jesus that day, is said to you and me: "You are my daughter - Your are my son...I am pleased with you... You are the Pleasure of God."

There is a passage in one of Paul Tillich's books which his readers know for its simple eloquence on the topic. Tillich thought profoundly and often complexly about our faith. But here, he thought and wrote very humanly, ~~and it means more to me now that I know that he had his own struggles.~~ the philosopher-theologian wrote:

"Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty

life. It strikes us when...our weakness...our lack of direction...have become intolerable. It strikes us, when year after year, the longed-for perfection does not appear, when the old complsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is though a voice were saying, 'You are acdepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know...Do not ask for the name now: perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now: perhaps later you will do ,much. Do not seek for anything... Simply accept the fact that you are accepted."

In the long history of our race it is the one word we have wanted to hear. We are, in fact, restless, until we find our rest in God. We are, in fact, ill-at-ease, anxious, until we know that we are accepted. In our personal pilgrimage it is

the word we desperately need. Hear it, again, today. Hear it, as it was heard, by a thirty year old man, standing in the muddy water of the Jordan River, deciding what to do with the rest of his life. Hear it, where you are, today, at this critical and joyful junction -

"You are my daughter.

You are my son.

I am pleased with you."

Amen.

Money" Pitcher Comes Back

is Leonard is the most remarkable righthander of two eras

never started another game, and the past three seasons that seemed than probable, Dennis Leonard ld already be the most remarkable her of the past twelve years. From 75 through 1982, only Steve Carlton on more frequently, though only Kansas City appeared to notice. Thrice a 20-game winner for the Royals, Leonard was the most bankable starter in the American League, the most successful righthander in baseball.

But because he habitually began his seasons at about the same speed as the news departs Missouri, Leonard was never called to any All-Star games. Away at his quickest pace in May 1983, the invincible-looking pitcher with the pirate-red mustache was dispatching a routine strike to Cal Ripken of Baltimore when Leonard's left knee (his landing leg) imploded and he disappeared. As sport usually calculates these things, this scarcely qualified as tragedy, even when lengthy surgeries and lost summers followed one after the other. Besides the memory of nearly 2,000 honorable if unheralded innings, Leonard had a guaranteed long-term contract to fall back on: $900,000 a year through 1986.

However, the image of professional athletes as complacent money grubbers has lately been suffering. Michael Jordan, pro basketball's most sublime subject, missed 64 games this year with a wounded foot but declined the Chicago Bulls' invitation to shirk the remainder of the season. Jordan would not even let the Bulls curtail his court time. "I am a basketball player," he declared, and rejoiced in scoring 49 and 63 points even while losing to the Boston Celtics.

"When you're a pitcher," says Leonard, 35 next week, "your only chance at peace of mind is never to second-guess yourself. If someone cranks a home run off your fastball, you can't start thinking, 'I should have thrown the curve.' I felt an obligation not to quit, but it wasn't because of the money. Five years down the road, I didn't want to start second-guessing my whole career, wondering if I gave my best."

So he became the phantom of the Royals Stadium training room. Whenever the team was gone, he was there tormenting his patellar tendon, the worst "ball of spaghetti" his doctors had ever restrung. "Occasionally he'd call me up and say, 'I didn't go to the park today,' " smiles Mickey Cobb, the trainer, "but I knew by looking at the room that he went every day." A small, bald man of 44, Cobb began life at 2 lbs. in rural Georgia, polio-ridden and without benefit of physician.

TED KIRK

Going against the Yankees last week

"I know there are still no guarantees."

He started limping at four. "I couldn't play when my friends were playing," he says, "so I carried the Band-Aids."

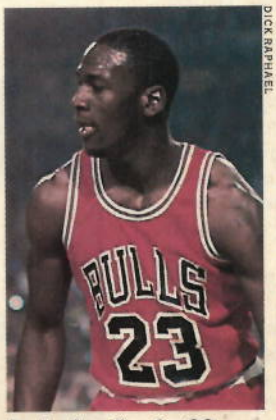
For Leonard, Cobb carried a good deal more than that. "Mick doesn't think he's handicapped," says the pitcher. "That inspired me." Through four operations, three despairing journeys back to square one, Leonard required more than inspiration. Dick Howser, a congenial man but a practical manager, supplied a belief that was better than faith. "You can only sympathize and pull for him so much," Howser says. "Then you got to see it."

By last July, Leonard was pitching batting practice. He started over in the minor leagues with the Fort Myers Royals (A) and gingerly pitched his way to the Memphis Chicks (AA). In September, 28 months after his collapse, Leonard returned to Kansas City to pitch the eighth inning of the second game of a doubleheader against Milwaukee. He allowed one hit. "This spring," Howser says, "I told him, 'You're going to have to be a good pitcher to make our staff.' He told me, 'I don't want to be an average pitcher anyway. I don't want to just be around.' "

When Leonard looked around, he should not have been so astonished to see that all the Paul Splittorffs and Larry Guras had given way to Bret Saberhagens, that Leonard's entire class had graduated. "It doesn't seem that long ago," he thought, "when I was the young pitcher." Without any quarter, he made the team, but Danny Jackson had to sprain an ankle to secure him a start. On April 12 the Royals played the Toronto Blue Jays a game that for melodrama eclipsed all their October playoffs.

In a scene straight from *The Monty Stratton Story,* Toronto immediately tested Leonard's leg with a bunt, and might have kept it up if bulky First Baseman Steve Balboni had not dived to the bag in such a heroic frenzy that Second Baseman Frank White laughed out loud. "There are times," White says, "when a whole team reaches down for something that's even better than winning. I know it sounds impossible." On the subject of impossibilities, consider three hits, 18 men retired in a row and a 1-0 victory that ended on a strikeout. "When I struck Rance Mulliniks out," Leonard says, "it was like I finally was home. Everyone ran out on the field except Mick, and he was the one I was waiting for." In the dugout, the pitcher pressed the ball into his trainer's hand.

Leonard won his next start too, and while he lost the one after that to the New York Yankees, 2-1, neither his leg nor his arm was to blame. It was his glove. The following morning, he was greeted by his son Ryan, 8. "Dad, I heard you lost last night." "Yeah, I screwed up an easy double play, threw the ball over everything and ended up with three errors." Ryan laughed so hysterically Leonard had to join him.



DICK RAPHAEL

Jordan heading for 63

The family is readjusting to having a ballplayer in the house. "When I packed up for the first road trip, they wondered where I was going." Around the neighborhood, he is better known as a Little League coach and groundkeeper. "Watching the kids play these last few years, I remembered how we all started out playing for the love of games. If you're lucky enough to make it to the N.F.L., the N.B.A. or big-league baseball, you start talking about 'a living' and 'a job' and 'having to go to work.' But I honestly think the majority of players in my position would have tried, and not one of them for the money. In the back of my mind, I know there are still no guarantees." On the other hand, he is overdue at the All-Star game.

—*By Tom Callahan*